Stephen A. Morris

Lincoln Park
Evolution of a Landscape

Although an important site for visitors to Washington, DC, in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Capitol Hill's Lincoln Park today is a little-known treasure seldom included in the typical tourist pilgrimages. Located a mile directly east of the Capitol, and surrounded by some of the grandest and best-preserved Victorian homes in the Capitol Hill Historic District, the park is primarily used by local residents and is seen as little more than a pleasant patch of green in a relatively dense part of the city or a convenient exercise yard for the family canine. It is cared for by the National Park Service as one of many disparate elements of the administrative grouping known as National Capitol Parks-East, and, though relatively well-maintained, provides virtually no clues of its history and significance.

For the few who take the time to investigate on their own, however, Lincoln Park offers a fascinating glimpse into Washington and the nation's past. The seven-acre swath of open space tells many stories. The ground itself, how it was planted and walks were laid through it, reveals much about the growth of the city of Washington and 19th- and 20th-century landscape ideas. An even richer vein of history is represented by the park's two sculptures, the Emancipation Group and the Bethune Memorial, installed almost 100 years apart, which face each other across the central greensward as if engaged in a symbolic dialogue.

Laid out in L'Enfant's plan for Washington as a square to hold a monumental column from which point all distances on the continent would be measured, the park, like East Capitol Street, was slow to develop, and, in fact, was used for years as a dumping ground. During the Civil War, it was the site of the Lincoln Hospital, named after the president, and among the places visited by Walt Whitman, who made rounds to comfort the injured and dying soldiers. The name apparently stuck and, in 1867, Congress authorized it to be called Lincoln Square as a memorial to the martyred leader, the first site to bear his name.

Consecrating the place to Lincoln's memory really took hold several years later, however, through the efforts begun shortly after the assassination by an African-American woman named Charlotte Scott of Virginia. Using her first $5 earned in freedom, Scott kicked off a fund raising campaign among freed blacks as a way of paying homage to the president who had issued the Emancipation Proclamation that liberated the slaves in the Confederate States. The campaign for the Freedmen's Memorial Monument to Abraham Lincoln, as it was to be known, was not the only effort of the time to build a monument to Lincoln; however, as the only one soliciting contributions exclusively from those who had most directly benefited from Lincoln's act of emancipation it had a special appeal. The funds were collected solely from freed slaves (primarily from African-American Union veterans), however, the organization controlling the effort and keeping the funds was a white-run, war-relief agency based in St.Louis, the Western Sanitary Commission. Initially, the Commission proposed a grandiose 'pyramid of sculpture' whose cost would far exceed the $20,000 that was raised in the first few months of the campaign. When additional appeals failed to produce the requisite funds, the Commission considered merging its efforts with other campaigns for a national monument to Lincoln (including one that would have placed the monument on the Capitol grounds).

After several years, the Commission abandoned its plans for an elaborate memorial and settled on a much simpler plan. This more modest sculpture was based on a design developed by an American artist living in Italy who, upon hearing of Lincoln's assassination, had independently produced a model for a statue of Lincoln and a kneeling, newly-freed slave. In 1871 the Western Sanitary Commission paid Thomas Ball to execute a monument based on his original model. Unlike the Commission's first scheme, Ball's sculpture failed in a fundamental way to capture the spirit of emancipation—that the former slaves were now free and equal to their fellow white citizens. The great abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, disliked the sculpture's not-so-subtle implication that the slave plays no role in his own liberation, kneeling servant-like beneath Mr. Lincoln's outstretched hand. On some level, the Commission recognized the problem and

required Ball to make minor modifications that in its view overcame it. The monument was cast in Munich in 1875 and shipped to Washington in 1876. Congress accepted the Emancipation Group, as it came to be known, from the "colored citizens of the United States" for placement in Lincoln Square and appropriated $3,000 for a pedestal upon which it would rest.

On the day of the statue's dedication, the 11th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination, April 14, 1876, Congress declared a holiday in the city and a parade was held down Pennsylvania Avenue around the Capitol and along East Capitol Street to the park. Among the marchers were African-American organizations such as the 21st Battalion of Colored Troops, Masonic units, and the Sons of Purity wearing white aprons and carrying the colors. President Ulysses S. Grant presided at the dedication ceremony which included the participation of dignitaries, such as members of the Cabinet and the Supreme Court as well as Congressmen and Senators. The Emancipation Proclamation was read and Mr. Douglass delivered a speech in which he recounted that Lincoln had been the only white man with whom he could speak for more than a few minutes who didn't point out the color of his skin or make him feel like less than an equal. Douglass overcame his personal distaste of the sculpture and ultimately supported the effort to build the monument primarily because he believed it would serve blacks as a defense should they ever be accused of ingratitude toward the man who was seen as largely responsible for their freedom.

In spite of its limitations, the statue proved popular enough that a replica (paid for by a wealthy abolitionist) was made in 1877 for the city of Boston, long a bastion of anti-slavery sentiment, and was placed in Park Square where it stands today. As the principal monument to Lincoln in the capital city of the late-19th and early-20th century, the statue was an important stop on tourist itineraries and views of it were reproduced in souvenir postcard books. In addition, it became the definitive sculptural treatment and visual representation of Emancipation, appearing on a three-cent commemorative stamp in 1940. Its role as a memorial to Lincoln was eclipsed, of course, by the Lincoln Memorial in West Potomac Park which was dedicated in 1922. Significantly, the new Lincoln Memorial emphasized Lincoln's role as 'Defender of the Union' rather than as 'the Great Emancipator.' (In an unlikely coincidence, one of Ball's students at the American Academy in Rome was Daniel Chester French, who sculpted the most famous representation of Lincoln, housed in the Lincoln Memorial.)

The installation of the monument provided the impetus for the federal government to finance landscape improvements for the park. By the time of the dedication, an iron post and chain fence enclosed at least a portion of the park. When the Washington Gaslight Company laid city gas mains in the neighborhood in 1874, lines were extended into the park to allow 15 gas lamps to be installed along graveled park walks. In keeping with English romantic landscape traditions, the walks had been laid out in curvilinear patterns. In the following year, a small wooden park lodge providing bathroom facilities and storage for tools was built. The park's plantings were improved during this period as well. By 1886, inventories prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported that the park was planted with 322 evergreen and deciduous trees of 38 varieties and 24 shrubs of 11 varieties, interspersed with flower beds. By 1884, two small ornamental fountains with spray jets, stone

From a 19th-century souvenir postcard.

copings, and basins of Portland cement had been installed on the north and south sides of the park just east of the 12th Street axis.

The park's landscape remained essentially unchanged with a few minor exceptions until 1934. In 1894 a five-foot-wide asphalt walk from the Lincoln statue to the East Capitol Street entrance was built. Also among the changes was the replacement, in 1914, of the original lodge by a trellised, stucco building sited at the eastern side of the park. Identical to the lodges constructed at the same time in other city parks, including the one that still stands in LaFayette Park across from the White House, the second structure survived until the mid-1970s when it was torn down to make way for the Bethune statue.

In 1931, plans were made to significantly alter the park's landscape, particularly the layout of the walks. The infrastructure by then had begun to suffer from insufficient maintenance, and an extensive refurbishing was necessary. The funds for the work did not become available in large quantities until the beginning of the Roosevelt Administration and the Works Progress Administration began awarding grants for Federal Works Projects. The work done at Lincoln park included tree surgery and replacement, regrading of walks, repair of benches and other general maintenance work. As part of these improvements, the park's 19th-century curvilinear walks, characteristic of the Victorian period's penchant for English Romantic landscape traditions, were replaced with more uniformly diagonal and circular paths which began to give it the appearance it would have in modern times. The Romantic landscape was giving way to a more formal landscape inspired by Beaux Arts concerns with symmetry and axiality (also characteristic of the work being carried out by the National Park Service during the same period to restore the National Mall according to the dictates of the McMillan Plan.)

Ironically, the New Deal refurbishing of the park coincided with a plan first proposed by the National Capital Park and Planning Commission in the late 1920s that would have destroyed the park and replaced it with Independence Square, the centerpiece of a proposed extension of the Mall eastward along East Capitol Street. The proposal to line East Capitol Street with monumental federal buildings was kept alive until the late 1940s and may have played a role in the neighborhood's decline during the same period. In the 1950s a segment of a proposed Inner Loop freeway circling central Washington would have marred the park's western side.

In spite of threats to the park's existence from federal planners and highway engineers, neighborhood residents and others continued over the years to use it as a gathering place. Among the events which the park hosted were religious services, outdoor band concerts (primarily the military service bands), freedom rallies (during the Civil Rights era) and commemorations of Emancipation and the Lincoln statue dedication.

The most recent major chapter in the park's evolution began in 1959 when Congress authorized the National Council of Negro Women to build a memorial to its founder, Mary McLeod Bethune, a well-known African-American educator and government advisor. Conceived originally to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1963, the monument was not dedicated until 1974 because of problems with fundraising (the bronze memorial ended up costing $400,000) and the priority given by the Council, an umbrella organization of African-American women's groups, to the efforts in support of the Civil Rights movement.

The new memorial required a new landscape design for the park, which was produced by Hilyard Robinson, a well-known, DC-based African-American architect. In order to accommodate the Bethune Memorial, the Lincoln statue was turned 180° to face east and moved east to be in line with 12th Street nearer to the center of the park. The 1914 lodge at the park's east end was removed and replaced with a large plaza in which the new statue would be placed. Since the figure of Mrs. Bethune (standing on her pedestal) is 17 feet high there was some concern that the new memorial would overshadow the Lincoln statue. In order to ensure the latter's preeminence, the plaza and the adjoining greensward (a new feature in the park) were set several feet below grade. Neighborhood needs were addressed by the two small children's play areas flanking the Bethune Memorial.

The sculptor of the Bethune Memorial was Robert Berks, an African-American artist based in New York. On the day of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, which took place while Berks was working on the commission for

the Bethune statue, Berks sculpted a half-life size head of the President which ultimately became the gigantic Kennedy bust in the Grand Foyer of Washington's Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. When it was dedicated in 1974, the Bethune Memorial was the first statue of an African American or a woman of any race on public park land in Washington. (The only previous statue of a black person was that of the freed slave in the Emancipation Group, which was based on Alexander Archer, the last man captured under the Fugitive Slave Act.)

The completion of the new landscape plan and the installation of the Bethune Memorial essentially transformed the park's landscape into the one that exists today. Minor changes are regularly carried out by the National Park Service, such as new lighting installed several years ago and routine tree replacement. The continual change and transformation of this landscape over the last 130 years leave a rich legacy, a layering of history that makes it a key component of the Capitol Hill Historic District.

With its national monuments commemorating the history of the nation's struggle for racial equality, the park is the crown jewel of Capitol Hill's urban squares and a special place in Washington. Local residents, represented by the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, and other interested groups, are working with officials of National Capital Parks-East to develop and install an appropriate wayside marker to interpret the diverse history of the site. Interpretation will ensure that the park is thought of not only as a great spot to walk the dog or enjoy flowering trees but also, once again, as one of the capital's most important historical sites.

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Stephen A. Morris is an outdoor recreation planner with the National Park Service.

Learning About Lowell

Lowell National Historical Park preserves and interprets the history of the American Industrial Revolution in Lowell, Massachusetts. The park includes historic cotton textile mills, canals, operating gatehouses, and worker housing. Turn-of-the-century trolleys operate, and boat tours trace the city's canals in the summer.

While the National Park Service has prepared many fine technical reports on the history of Lowell and its mill workers, much of this material is not easily available to the general public. Anyone interested in learning more about Lowell should visit the park's web site <http://www.nps.gov/lowe>. The following publications provide useful information about Lowell as well.

The historic resources of Lowell are varied and complex.Photo by Ron Greenberg.

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Harry A. Butowsky